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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000549

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: PREPARATIONS FOR BALIKATAN 2009 ON TRACK

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (a) and (b)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: With strong public support from senior Philippine officials and provincial leaders, preparations for Balikatan 2009 continue as scheduled. Senior Embassy officials traveled to the central Philippine region where the majority of Balikatan humanitarian assistance projects will be conducted. Meeting with local politicians, religious leaders, and law enforcement officials, Mission personnel briefed them on planned civil-military activities while soliciting their views and perceptions. Despite the firm public support of national and provincial leaders, fringe left-wing organizations have held sporadic small-scale protests to demonstrate against Balikatan and the presence of U.S. troops. At the same time, the New People's Army has issued statements calling on the local population to reject Balikatan civil-military projects in the Bicol region for being "U.S. military intervention disguised as humanitarian assistance." In the run-up to Balikatan, scheduled April 16-30, the Mission will continue monitoring the security situation and maintain proactive engagement with national and local officials and the media to ensure a smooth and productive event. END SUMMARY.

PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT AND U.S. OUTREACH PAYING DIVIDENDS

¶2. (C) Preparations for Balikatan 2009 (BK 09), an annual bilateral exercise conducted to promote interoperability between the U.S. and Philippine militaries, continue as scheduled. Approximately 6,000 U.S. troops and 3,000 personnel from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) will take part in the two-week exercise beginning April 16. The three distinct components are a Staff/Command Exercise, Field Training Exercise, and Civil Military projects. The Staff/Command and Field Exercises will take place at various locations in central and northern Luzon, to include Fort Magsaysay, Crow Valley, Subic Bay, Clark Air Base, and Ternate just outside of metro Manila. Civil-military projects will occur in Albay, Sorsogon, and Masbate provinces of the Bicol region in southern Luzon and will include 22 medical events and 6 engineering projects.

¶3. (C) Calling Balikatan a vital exercise for the Philippine military, Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro and AFP Chief of Staff General Alexander Yano voiced their unqualified support for BK 09 during a large press conference at Philippine military headquarters February 9. In attendance at the press conference and briefing were Embassy officials and the governors of the three southern Luzon provinces of Bicol, where civil-military operations will take place. The media briefing was successful in countering negative press reports that combat exercises and war games would be taking place in Bicol, an allegation that had been fueled by anti-government critics and propaganda from the New People's Army (NPA), a communist

terrorist insurgency.

14. (C) In addition to continued engagement with senior Philippine government leadership, senior Embassy officials traveled to Bicol to brief local politicians, religious leaders, and law enforcement officials from Albay, Sorsogon, and Masbate on the strictly humanitarian nature of the civil-military activities planned for the region. Mission personnel rebutted allegations of large-scale military exercises in Bicol during media appearances and solicited the views of provincial leaders. At the conclusion of the visits, provincial representatives who were briefed were unanimous in their support of the humanitarian assistance projects to be conducted in their respective areas. They were grateful for Embassy consultations and said they would make a strong effort to inform the local population of the benefits that the joint U.S.-Philippine humanitarian missions were bringing to their region.

PROTESTS NOT A SIGN OF SECURITY THREAT

15. (C) Despite the very public support by both national and provincial leaders, fringe elements have held small-scale sporadic protests in Manila and in the Bicol region against the upcoming Balikatan exercise. During February, the capitol city of Albay Province, Legaspi, was the site of several anti-Balikatan protests. Led by local critics of the government and the NPA, these demonstrations were peaceful, with attendance at most events numbering in the range of several dozen participants. A caravan rally and a civic

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meeting in an auditorium each attracted approximately 1,000 participants, but there were no instances of violence. While most of these protests or rallies questioned Balikatan activities being conducted in the area, other demonstrations were used to air anti-government sentiments or rail against local issues.

16. (C) The protests to date have been largely nonviolent, but recent reports by local law enforcement officials cite veiled threats from a "low-level commander" of a local subset of the NPA, who stated that Philippine government escorts of a planned UNICEF visit to a remote area of southeastern Masbate Province would be ambushed. The reports led United Nations officials to issue a travel ban to Masbate for their staff. Separate, but equally credible reports, stated that the NPA intended to extort "taxes" from UNICEF. This unsubstantiated threat, while not linked to Balikatan, is an example that illustrates the difficulty in determining whether NPA poses a legitimate security concern for U.S. personnel participating in Balikatan activities in Bicol. NPA propaganda has stated that AFP units providing force protection for Balikatan activities in Bicol are a legitimate target, a development the Embassy is closely monitoring, but has not deemed credible at this time.

COMMENT

17. (C) In the run-up to the April 16-30 Balikatan exercise, the Mission will continue its proactive engagement with national and local officials, as well as with its various media contacts, to encourage balanced reporting and public support for Balikatan. We remain confident that with the exception of a small minority of reflexive anti-American leftists who protest any U.S.-related issue, we will continue to receive full public support for Balikatan from civil and political leadership. While anti-U.S. NPA rhetoric began in January, assertive actions by the Philippine military and police have mitigated much of the NPA's propaganda in recent weeks. A key element of the NPA's anti-Balikatan message has been that the Philippine government, by partnering with U.S.

military personnel, is not working in the Bicol population's best interest, a message that is not gaining traction as the obvious benefits of medical and engineering projects are being promoted by local elected officials and religious leaders. Nevertheless, the Mission will continue working with Philippine security forces to evaluate the security situation in Bicol closely and put measures in place to ensure U.S. personnel participating in Balikatan operate in a safe environment.

KENNEY